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More than Necessary, Less than Sufficient: Democratization and the Control of Corruption

MORE THAN NECESSARY: CHECKING POWER WITH POWER

Democracy, democratization, and the presumptions of accountability, limits on power, and rule of law that accompany them are central to many scenarios for checking corruption (Johnston 2014). Building coalitions, engaging and strengthening civil society, practicing transparency, and mobilizing the electorate, among other strategies, assume workable levels of freedom, civil liberties, and voluntary action. At the same time, however, democratization presents corruption risks of its own: vote-buying, campaign finance and lobbying abuses, and influence-market dealings (Johnston 2005, 2014) are parts of everyday democratic life. So too, in many democracies, is a widespread sense that the influence of political money has undercut citizen influence and the quality of public life. Reducing corruption without democratic processes and accountability will be an uphill battle, absent the unusual leadership of a reform-minded authoritarian regime. But does it necessarily follow that democratic institutions and procedures will do much better?

In this paper I offer two arguments. One is that *deep democratization* (Johnston 2005, chap. 8; 2014) is central to lasting reform. Deep democratization does not mean that democracy itself will necessarily control corruption. Indeed, India's history suggests that where



economic development—not just growth but also the rise of effective economic institutions—is strikingly uneven or lacking, democracy may even make some varieties of corruption worse (Sun and Johnston 2010). Further, the political history of many other more affluent democracies suggests that they too have much anticorruption work to do. Instead, deep democratization is a continuing process of setting limits to power, building accountability, and establishing social and political foundations of support for reforms by bringing more voices and interests into the governing process. Difficult and contentious as deep democratization may be, my second argument is more pessimistic: I will suggest that expecting citizens to check the abuse of power with their votes is likely to be a futile hope. That will be the case, I suggest, partly because of the nature of corruption itself and partly as a result of the ways electoral processes do—and do not—work. Our best long-term hope for mobilizing democratic influences against corruption will have more to do with linking reform to citizens' own interests and grievances, with developing a tolerance for political contention, and with long-term and often indirect efforts to build anticorruption strength within society itself.

POWER, CONTENTION, AND THE IDEA OF CORRUPTION

Deep democratization amounts to giving more people and groups a meaningful voice in governance and rule making (see also Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Any such process is likely to be contentious and disorderly; it will more likely revolve around countless grievances than any overriding vision of good government. In extensively corrupt societies, deep democratization is unlikely to attain breakthroughs in political morality or anything like fully open, rational government. It can (though by no means must) culminate in settlements and accommodations that institutionalize accountability and limits on power (Ostrom 1990; 1998). Where such arrangements acquire legitimacy and credibility it is primarily because, from the standpoint of those who built them, they work.

The clash of interests and values; contention over the acceptable sources and uses of wealth and power; and disputes over the nature



and significance of rights and accountability are of the essence in deep democratization. So are self-interest and the political energy it can create. The difficult and often risky work of challenging the powerful and demanding accountability is not easily sustained through appeals to virtue alone; indeed, to the extent that we define corruption control as a public good, our efforts are likely to fall victim to collective action problems (Rothstein 2011; but see also Auyero, Lapegna, and Poma 2009; Mungiu-Pippidi 2013). Better government for all is an appealing idea but may strike many as a risky and unlikely one. Once the initial excitement wears off, anticorruption momentum can be difficult to maintain, especially where many people think they might stand to benefit from the old ways of doing things or suspect that their neighbors and competitors will continue to make deals under the table. By contrast, the defense of one's own interests—rights, property, family, personal safety and freedom, the chance to earn a living—is a more lasting motivation when it comes to confronting the wealthy and powerful.

An emphasis on politics and the role of self-interest in building a strong state has not always been a common theme in anticorruption thinking. For many reformers, keeping politics separate from administration is an article of faith, and many anticorruption appeals rest on the idea of serving broader civic goals and values before one's own. A different but related outlook has it that the proper role of the state is as a referee of sorts, serving the small and essentially technical functions of administration and rule enforcement. From that view have flowed a variety of schemes for restraining corruption through better administrative procedures, or via privatization and other cutbacks of the state role. The former may well improve the way government does its business, but is no guarantee of better policy or more effective ways of addressing the problems and threats concerning citizens. The latter, by taking officials out of the economy and society as much as possible, supposedly deprives them of any influence or leverage that they can put out for rent. The massive corruption associated with privatization in cases such as Argentina's (Guillan Montero 2011; Manzetti 2009), however, casts considerable doubt on that argument. (So, ironi-



cally, does the fact that Argentina's gradual rollback of 1990s-era privatizations has had little or no effect on corruption [see, for example, Manzetti 2009].)

Minimalist views of the state and the denigration of self-interested political action underestimate the value of both, not only for governing but also for reform. "Running government like a business" may be an attractive slogan, but it is neither possible nor desirable. It is impossible because governments, where they hold meaningful power, are monopoly institutions possessing unique powers of coercion and sources of revenue. They perform an extraordinarily broad range of functions—many of which cannot be provided by markets and many having important symbolic and moral dimensions—and they contend with a wide range of expectations and values that are complicated and contradictory yet (outside autocratic settings) cannot be completely ignored. Most governments are expected to answer to far broader segments of the population than businesses must (or can) deal with, and citizens have roles for which there are no direct counterparts in economic dealings, where rights and standing are generally based on ownership. Politics, unlike markets, is driven not by the convergence of interests—A wants what B is selling—but more often by the clash of interests. The "contagion of conflict," as Schattschneider (1960) called it, is a critical source of political energy and accountability. Indeed, in democracies at least such contention is not what is wrong with politics: it is, instead, politics itself.

Without the clash of political interests there would likely be no such notion as corruption. To illustrate that point it is helpful to ask not *why is there so much corruption*, but *why is there not much more of it?* Where did the basic idea of limits on power originate? A brief thought experiment: imagine an absolute autocrat. No laws or countervailing forces restrain that ruler's actions. The right to rule rests on a monopoly of force, claiming divine blessing, or—via hereditary succession—a lucky dip into the gene pool. Notions of "the public" and its interests mean nothing; people are just there to be exploited. Any views they might have regarding right and wrong, wealth and power, or legitimacy matter not at all.



In what sense can our autocrat be corrupt? There are no rules to break. No one else's well-being matters. There are no collective principles of loyalty, and no constraints. We might judge the autocrat as corrupt by our standards (standards that he or she is free to ignore) or as morally corrupt in the eyes of God (a definitive judgment for some but not much of an immediate restraint). Is there corruption here in the broader sense of a collective state of being? Dobel's (1978) analysis of classical conceptions of corruption emphasizes the loss of a ruler's or regime's ability to inspire loyalty—an acknowledgement that others do matter. But as our absolute autocrat can rule through fear, loyalty is irrelevant. Contemporary meanings of corruption resting upon rules, checks and balances, duties of office, the public interest, or positions of trust have no meaning in our imaginary case.

This example obviously is a caricature. But it illuminates the systemic and inherently *political* challenge of drawing and enforcing boundaries around the acceptable pursuit, use, and exchange of power and wealth. However much we may justify them in terms of fundamental values, those limits are not natural features of the political landscape. They exist because someone demanded them—most likely, because they had a significant stake in defining some limits. At some point, rulers found it advantageous to abide by certain limits—conflict has its costs and risks to those in power as well—and to take others' interests into consideration. The path to such developments is usually contentious (for South African examples see Zuern 2011, esp. chap. 5), for a rule or agreement strong enough to protect someone will usually restrain someone else.

The emergence of a “public” domain, of boundaries between it and private affairs, and of a state owned by no one, passed through many stages. In England from the eleventh through the seventeenth centuries, for example, practices like tax and customs “farming,” whereby revenue functions were in effect franchised out to entrepreneurs who recouped their investments by collecting revenue, provided income and status to officials and predictable revenues for the sovereign (Ashton 1956). There and elsewhere, what would later



become *public* offices were treated as personal property, openly bought and sold (Swart 2002; Peck 1990). No notions of merit, save perhaps loyalty, were involved, although any sort of merit selection might well have recruited many of the same people. Those “freehold offices” were defended by Montesquieu and Bentham as efficient, and by Burke as a legitimate property right (Scott 1972, 89–90, 93). In France, Spain, England, and to a degree in China, networks of “freehold bureaucrats” supplied their patrons with revenue, political support, and an intelligence network (89–94). By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries English monarchs were regarded as “the fountain of virtue”—a notion that not only conveyed moral force but also, in the fountain metaphor, reflected the ways they bought support through patronage (Peck 1990). Ideas like these were not only symbolic and normative claims but were also quite practical ways of projecting power.

Such practices could lead to contention, however. Once an office was bought it was generally sold for good, and supplanting a freeholder by creating a rival or superior office could mean a fight. As societies grew, their would-be elites became too numerous to be bought off. In Elizabethan England, for example, university graduates had long been accustomed to obtaining church or state offices through personal connections. But when Oxford and Cambridge began to turn out graduates in unprecedented numbers, those left out took the lead in objecting to what had been accepted practice (Hurstfield 1973, 155–56). What van Klaveren (2002) termed “intermediary groups,” including clergy, military officers, civil servants, merchants, and members of guilds and professions, also became more assertive. While such groups were in some respects precursors of civil society, they were scarcely tribunes of the people or moral innovators; frequently they encouraged corruption as they sought advantages for themselves (88). Still, through stalemate and obstinacy they could be a counterweight to the sovereign’s day-to-day power, their tenacity reflecting their lasting interests in protecting wealth and status while expanding their own autonomy.

Such convoluted, back-and-forth contention followed no grand overall design. It varied considerably from place to place, and while



idealism was by no means absent—consider the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen or the Putney Debates—often there was little that was noble about the motives involved (the Putney Debates of 1647 saw soldiers and officers of Cromwell’s New Model Army voice conflicting views on England’s constitutional arrangements and on the role of everyday citizens toward the crown and the aristocracy). For both the Putney debaters and the Declaration, property and the rights linked to it were major concerns: who should, and should not, be allowed to vote? While Rainborough proclaimed that “[T]he poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he,” that idea excluded women (Kettle 2007).

Still, as political interests proliferated and gathered force, newer ideas about government came into being:

[I]n the nineteenth century, when the more democratic form of government limited the aristocracy, and the modern idea of the State came into existence, the conception of public office as private property disappeared. The State became considered as a moral entity and the exercising of public authority as a duty (Scott 1972, 96).

We invoke such notions today when we speak of “the rule of law” not just as a good way to do public and private business but as a matter of justice.

However fundamental those ideas may seem today, they are *outcomes* of contention over the limits of power rather than their sources. Years ago Rustow made a similar argument about the rise of democracy: that process, he wrote, was driven by “prolonged and inconclusive political struggle. . . [T]he protagonists must represent well-entrenched forces . . . and the issues must have profound meaning to them. . . . Democracy was not the original or primary aim; it was sought as a means to some other end or it came as a fortuitous by-product of the struggle” (Rustow 1970, 353). While far from inevitable, political settlements of such struggles—often ad hoc and conceded only



grudgingly, as with the Magna Carta—can be reached, and can solidify into legitimate institutions and standards because they protect real interests. Similarly, Rustow concluded that factors sustaining democracy where it is strong—literacy, affluence, multiparty politics, or a middle class, for example—are not necessarily the ones that created it. So too with corruption control: checks and balances, or expectations of transparency and accountability, may be expressed as impersonal legal and moral principles. But they came from somewhere—usually from people defending themselves from abuses by others.

That is the core of deep democratization. It differs from the idea of fighting corruption by consolidating a full-scale democracy in at least two important ways. One is that deep democratization is a process, not an outcome: indeed, a number of today's established democracies have much democratizing work still to do (Johnston 2014, chap. 7). The other is that democracy as a type of government creates corruption risks of its own, as noted earlier. Deep democratization is a more basic process of broadening the range of groups and outlooks shaping the rules governing wealth, power, and connections between them. As Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, 79) argue, "Politics is the process by which a society chooses the rules that will govern it."

Hindsight has a way of clarifying complicated events—often excessively. As a practical matter, deep democratization in contemporary societies may be fraught with risk, as the events of the Arab Spring—to cite just one set of examples—show. Who is a sincere reformer, and who is using "reform" to build an image, obtain aid, or jail the opposition? Can we encourage political contention without inviting violent repression? Developing societies often lack institutions strong enough to counterbalance their own internal stresses, much less deal with added contention touched off by well-meaning corruption fighters. At best, the notion of deep democratization suggests that reform opportunities may come disguised as political dilemmas.

What of the other end of the scale, however? Where the rule of law, open electoral competition, civil liberties, and principles of accountability are well entrenched, should we not expect citizens to be



able to check corruption—or at least to vote some scoundrels out while rewarding those who govern well—with their votes? Electoral democracies are heavily represented among the countries scoring best on international corruption indices, for what that evidence is worth; why would competitive elections not be one of our most potent safeguards? Those questions are the focus of the following discussion, which draws in part upon Johnston 2013.

LESS THAN SUFFICIENT: ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY AS A CHECK ON CORRUPTION

Given their high levels of development and the strength of their institutions, we might expect that electoral democracies allow and encourage citizens to restrain abuses of wealth and power. “Vote the Scoundrels Out!” was a reform slogan in American cities a century ago. Most transparency proposals, many political-finance reforms, and the hopes we place upon a strong civil society and free press rest on the notion that an aroused and informed public will use their votes to demand and reward better performance from government—or, at least, to punish the venal and ineffective.

In fact voters do at times oust corrupt officials and punish their political parties too. Italian voters demolished the nation’s entire party system—save for the Communists—in 1993 in the wake of the *Tangentopoli* scandals. President Richard Nixon’s Republican Party took a massive hit in the congressional elections of 1974 even though Nixon himself had left office in disgrace. By electing Vicente Fox as president in 2000, Mexican voters turned their backs on the venerable Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party) for the first time in 71 years. In 2010 the fallout from the UK’s parliamentary expenses scandal ousted members from all major parties, and discouraged others from standing for re-election.

Still, the notion that competitive elections can check corruption in lasting ways is difficult to demonstrate in practice (a symposium of research articles on this issue appears in the journal *Crime, Law, and Social Change* [vol. 60, no. 5 (2013)]). In addition, elections, campaigns,



and the ways they are financed can give rise to corruption of their own. Transitions to electoral democracy might not so clearly affect *amounts* of corruption—essentially immeasurable in any event—as it might change the *kinds* taking place (Johnston 2005, chaps. 4–7). A look at headlines from Italy, Australia, France, Mexico, Japan, and the United States suggests that mass outpourings of anticorruption sentiment at the polls have not stamped out corruption in lasting ways anywhere.

Indeed, evidence is mixed on whether voters will reliably punish corrupt officials and parties at all. Many of the examples cited above refer to scandals on a system-shaking scale—viz. Watergate or *Tangentopoli*—or, as with Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party, to longstanding corruption in which electoral politics had long been just one more embedded process. Where there are no elections, and where elections are manipulated from above, corrupt officials and their clients are more likely to abuse their powers. But a wide range of factors—attributes of corruption, both as a concept and as a political issue; the nature of elections and of voter choice at the individual and aggregate levels; and political and economic trends common to many liberal democracies—all suggest we should lower our expectations. Perhaps the more remarkable thing is not that voters fail to throw some scoundrels out but rather that they ever do so at all.

A number of assumptions lie behind “voting the scoundrels out”—inter alia, that voters care about corruption and agree on what it is. We must assume further that corruption actually does come to light, that it is widely and accurately publicized, that voters trust the political process enough to take part in it—and feel safe as they do—and that they can organize and communicate among themselves. We would have to assume that the fundamental dynamics of the electoral system are bottom-up rather than top-down, that votes are freely cast and honestly counted, that vote buying does not take place on a significant scale, and that elites do take public opinion into account. The choices on offer, and competition among them, must be genuine rather than artificial, and must be seen to be so. Those assumptions set the bar fairly high.



Does the vote check corruption in any systemic way? Causality can be complex: while we focus on voter reactions to specific events, election results might more often signal to the elite that the public is uninformed, apathetic, or easily misled by allegations of scandal. Further, on key connections we lack valid and reliable evidence: we cannot measure corruption that does occur with any precision, and determining how much did *not* happen because of an election result (or for any other reason) is logically impossible. Some of the channels by which the real or anticipated choices of voters might inhibit corruption exist at levels beyond our observation: an official's own sense of electoral self-preservation (or, for an appointed functionary, the risk of undermining sympathetic political patrons) must be balanced against temptations to engage in self-enrichment. A prominent scoundrel's defeat could have significant demonstration effects for a time. But against that are much more immediate temptations and moral hazards flowing from short-term electoral competition—the threat of losing office, after all, particularly because of a shortage of campaign funds, can encourage desperate and corrupt deals. We might hope for a broad “culture of integrity,” but a “culture of corruption” built around elections and financial machinations is a possibility too.

Another difficulty with the electoral-restraint argument is the fact that we have no consensus on the definition of corruption. While that is an analytical problem of long standing, at least two practical problems follow as well. The first is that, except in cases of the most egregious misconduct, elite miscreants can usually deny that they have acted in corrupt ways—often, they can even claim they were seeking the greater good or at least taking action against threats and foes. Richard Nixon's defenders during Watergate were legion: his actions, they variously claimed, were made necessary by the excesses of the government's critics, were nothing new in the broad spectrum of campaign tricks, and in any event were made legitimate by the fact that he was president.

The second problem is that it is hard to say where the concept of corruption ends. A tremendous range of actions can be portrayed as corrupt or at least as suspect: Is a legislator who steers a national govern-



ment project into the home constituency being an effective advocate or buying votes? Is a representative who repeatedly votes in favor of a major industry in that constituency, and who enjoys contributions from that industry, bought—or just protecting economic opportunities for the folks back home? Similarly, it is easy to portray relatively minor or technical rule violations as major scandals. A local official who bills an agency for an extra hotel night after a conference may, depending upon personalities and the phase of the electoral cycle, receive more publicity than another's gradual but systematic diversion of places in a jobs program to his supporters. A candidate whose campaign finance reports are late may be more widely criticized than another who pushes a company's pet proposals in the expectation of receiving a directorship or lobbying job after leaving office. Thus, for many cases of possible corruption there may not be much of a popular consensus to mobilize.

Corruption issues as voters experience them will often arise in a fog of allegations and countercharges, political noise that reaches a crescendo as campaigns move into the endgame. Real cases of official abuse can be complicated business, difficult for journalists and citizens to understand. Partly as a result, news coverage too frequently reduces such stories to personalities and the horse-race aspects of political campaigns—precisely the sorts of coverage encouraged by the commercial pressures that increasingly shape the news. Some abuses will come to light, if at all, only long after opportunities to respond at the polls have come and gone. For those who are weary of political contention, abuses of power can be indistinguishable from other kinds of controversy, all of which may appear to be what is wrong with politics rather than opportunities to put things right. Many voters will think they have heard it all before. To the extent that they do pay attention, they will often discount allegations based on their timing and sources, and indeed may have good reason to do so. Or on Election Day they may choose to stay home.

ELECTIONS AND THE “MANDATE MYTH”

In many societies there are no elections at all; elsewhere, they take place in the wake of conflict and are dominated by fear, distrust, and bad



memories. Where elections are emerging as legitimate exercises they may still be contested by parties and leaders who are nearly all compromised in various ways or lack broad popular support. Governments and parties in those settings commonly lack long-term records to stand on, and actual performance in office is a marginal influence on the vote.

If only by a process of elimination, then, hopes of checking corruption at the polls focus primarily upon well-institutionalized liberal democracies. Even there, however, it is not necessarily simple to punish the corrupt at the polls. Some reasons are practical ones: much corruption never comes to light, and (in part *because* elections are an established routine) many voters have relatively low levels of political interest and knowledge. Some allegedly corrupt activities involve no clear-cut villains, or involve actions that might strike some as generous or compassionate. Thus, questions of accountability can be complex. In parliamentary systems, is there any point in trying to punish the party of a corrupt national politician by voting against that party's local candidates? In proportional representation systems—a category including many variations—voters could be forgiven for wondering how their anticorruption vote would translate into the allocation of seats; in first-past-the-post systems, they might well wonder whether there is truly a connection between their votes and overall outcomes. Any voter's choices, beginning with the choice of whether to vote at all where it is not legally required, are bundles of compromises. Competing issues and personalities can override sentiments about corruption: partisan, ethnic, or religious loyalties may shape not only the choice of how to vote but perceptions of corruption issues in general. And when all of those compromised choices—both those reflecting careful calculations on the part of voters and those arrived at in last-minute or careless ways—are aggregated, there is rarely any sensible way of determining what the voters have said (Dye, Zeigler, and Schubert 2012).

Most democratic electoral systems are dominated by two or three major parties, none with a spotless record and all open to suspicions that the corruption issues they do raise are mostly for tactical advantage. Parties critical of the status quo—even those taking public stands



on corruption—do not necessarily put real reform high on their list of priorities. The role of antiestablishment parties in Western Europe—France’s Front Nationale, the UK Independence Party and British National Party, the Danish People’s Party, the late Jörg Haider’s Austrian Freedom Party—is instructive in this regard (Judt 2005, chap. 22). Like other parties they criticize corruption, at least in diffuse terms, from time to time—in 2012 Marine Le Pen’s Front Nationale made an issue of French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s links to wealthy people—but usually do so to mobilize anger and resentment, not in service of coherent reforms. In the case of the United States, the so-called Tea Party has placed a number of figures in Congress. At various points most of them have made sweeping critiques of the “duopoly” networks of established parties and their contributors, but as of late 2013 none had made serious efforts to propose new corruption controls, much less enact them. Antisystem parties rarely stand a chance of gaining real power; when they become coalition partners for a time they usually lose popularity rapidly (Judt 2005, chap. 22) as they fade into the broader government scene. Were they to win outright power, their agendas would likely have little to do with core questions of corruption. Immigration, nationalism, taxation, and sometimes-explicit appeals to racism and anti-Semitism are more effective. Their rule would, to say the least, do little to enhance broad democratic accountability. Meanwhile, when mainstream parties are seriously threatened by antisystem groups they often band together, citing—with good reason?—the need to defend democratic procedures and values (for France, see Agence France Presse 2013). Thus the net effect of antisystem parties may ironically be to help cement the current system in place.

In some instances corruption may so enrich politicians or parties that they can spend lavish amounts on campaigns, rendering competitors all but invisible and, in certain cases, buying whatever votes and polling officials they need. Conversely, some voters, even those who are unhappy about corruption, may nonetheless have a stake in the status quo: they may owe their jobs to political patrons, anticipate petty benefits, or have a business stake in continuity of political leadership.



Political action committees in the United States, for example, contribute overwhelmingly to incumbents of both major parties, setting up a vicious cycle in which incumbents attract so much funding that challengers have little chance of winning, which discourages contributors from backing likely losers. Ironically, transparency can make matters worse, as anyone contributing directly to a powerful senator's or representative's opponent must do so on the public record. Recent trends opening channels for large and often undisclosed indirect contributions may undercut some of that logic but further weaken voters' ability to police the political process.

Yet another family of issues has to do with trends that are reshaping liberal democracies and the broader markets and political processes on which they depend (Wedel 2009). Even in affluent democracies, global economic competition (as with the power of private institutions, capital markets, and international organizations) has limited the range of policy options for parties and candidates. States choosing to generously augment social welfare benefits will likely be quickly penalized by global markets—or, at least, have reason to fear that such will transpire—and some will face sanctions from international organizations. Where that is the case, elections are less likely to turn on clear policy alternatives, to the extent that they ever have done so; instead, scandal becomes a (poor) substitute for policy-based competition. We can't beat those other guys on the basis of housing or pensions policy, a strategist might well conclude, but we can certainly dig up dirt about them.

Such developments not only intensify “scandal fatigue”—they are part of a broader process by which even thoughtful voters who want to choose a different course for government find few meaningful choices on offer. Increasingly, citizens who have repeatedly been urged to vote for “change,” and who think they have done so, see few results. Changes do happen, of course, but for reasons beyond their knowledge and understanding—and, certainly, beyond their control. Electoral mandates may only seem to perpetuate existing ways of governing. That may stimulate support for antisystem parties, or at least make some voters receptive to their appeals, but for others the response is to abstain.



Citizens of liberal democracies who seek significant change must do so through political processes, and within economic and legal systems, that are already shaped by the influence of wealth. Wealthy interests and individuals dominate campaign finance, and wealthy individuals populate legislatures and high levels of other public institutions. Nearly half of the members of the United States House and Senate are millionaires (Politifact.com 2013), and many others do not miss that mark by much. Wealth by itself is neither corrupt nor necessarily corrupting, but many who possess it have distinctive world views and move in networks far removed from most voters' experiences. In any event, a persistent pattern of electing—and re-electing—individuals far wealthier than the general population is not a promising strategy for accountability.

Privatization, global economic liberalization, and deregulation (whatever their other advantages might be) have also moved many decisions and lines of accountability out of public domains and into private ones. Stiglitz (2012) argues that a great deal of rent-seeking has been legalized—indeed often entrenched in public law—and moved into the private sector. Such advantages range from artificially low royalties charged to firms extracting minerals from public lands, to selective but favorable deregulation, to a revenue system that increasingly taxes income from work while giving a pass to wealth derived from holding—and manipulating—capital. Lessig (2011) points to a whole range of elite activities, many of them legal, that exploit the public's trust, as well as its institutions and resources, for private benefit. Some research on the effects of medicines and chemicals is underwritten by the manufacturers of those substances, and repeatedly draws on the credibility of publicly supported universities and scientists. Findings are frequently skewed toward manufacturers' interests (for example, the controversial chemical Bisphenol-A; Lessig 2011, 22–26) and shape regulatory decisions in favorable ways.

In the face of such powerful and inaccessible processes of influence, what is a voter to do? What, in our market-dominated world, is really corrupt—an idea that, after all, rests upon restraining uses of



wealth and power—and *who decides*? Much of what strikes many citizens as corrupt consists of accepted, even laudable, activities that have been pushed beyond some threshold of unacceptability: consider, as examples, political contributions, lobbying, and the formation and activities of trade and business associations. How, in deregulated systems dominated by the wealthy, are key thresholds to be defined, and made politically relevant?

WHAT CAN REFORMERS DO?

When it comes to the difficulty of checking corruption through the ballot box it is hard to suggest many remedies, since we are dealing not so much with fixable problems in electoral democracy as with the nature of the process itself. After all, we have never really expected voters in democracies to be able to steer policy or implementation with any precision, and have harbored doubts as to whether they should. So too with corruption: perhaps the best we should expect is that in particularly egregious cases voters can react after the fact. It may be less remarkable that voters do not routinely punish corrupt parties and officials than that they are able to do so at all.

Perhaps the way ahead is not just to deter or punish corrupt activities, important as both undoubtedly are, but also to build anti-corruption strength in societies. In well-governed countries, after all, it is more than just fear of the law that checks power, and laws derive some of their power from the broad social expectation that they will be enforced. At least as often, particularly in corruption-plagued societies, we see good ideas and well-crafted policy wither for lack of credibility, enforcement, and continuing support. Can we, perhaps by encouraging political contention, replicate some of the historical processes discussed earlier?

Perhaps we can. The first step is a matter of fundamental strategy: rather than devising anticorruption plans and then enlisting citizen support (a process that all too often falls victim to collective action problems, among others) we should emphasize anticorruption and other reforms that empower citizens to advance and defend *their own*



interests—the hopes and grievances they care about most, and that are likely to sustain action even in the face of risks and resistance. Among other things, this approach encourages us to think of corruption control not just as a matter of crime control, or of better government, but of broad-based fairness and justice.

That sort of reform will be a gradual, lengthy process taking place at many levels: deep democratization cannot just be proclaimed. It suggests that reform will be more likely to succeed not as an immediate, direct, high-profile assault against official misconduct but rather through more indirect, long-term, and sustainable efforts to enhance citizens' effective demands for protection and fairness. While actual reductions in corruption might take place over relatively short periods of time—Rothstein's account (2011) of reductions of corruption in Sweden is a fine example—they may well depend upon a longer process of building constituencies and preparing the political ground for action. Historically, many societies have limited the abuse of power in indirect ways, and in the course of contending over other issues (Johnston 2014, chaps. 1, 2), rather than through schemes for good government as such. Finally, and perhaps most difficult to grasp, corruption is not the same thing everywhere: the challenges of deep democratization, and the specific ways in which we might assess progress, will change depending upon the kind of corruption syndrome we confront (Johnston 2014).

Thus, there is no master plan for deep democratization and normally, much must be done before direct attacks on corruption will have a chance of success. We can, however, specify four long-term tasks that are essential to the process (these ideas, and their applications in specific cases, are discussed at length in Johnston 2014):

- ▶ *Increasing pluralism*: enlarging the number and diversity of socially rooted groups, interests, and viewpoints politically active in society.
- ▶ *Opening up safe political and economic “space”* in which people can act, advocate their interests, and compete with others—including rulers—and an economy in which property rights, enforcing



agreements, settling disputes, and the exercise of official power are matters of law rather than of sheer power.

- ▶ *Reform activism*: enabling and encouraging people sharing grievances to act on those concerns, and to voice opinions and demands, with some chance of having real effects.
- ▶ *Maintaining accountability*: insisting that powerful people and organizations in both the public and private sectors respect rights and liberties, laws, limits on their powers, and their own social commitments, and being able to seek redress when they do not.

Clearly, only some of these tasks—reform activism and maintaining accountability—involve directly challenging corruption, and as the list implies, other aspects of democratization must be well advanced before direct confrontations are likely to be effective. Moreover, a society’s performance on one or more of these tasks can deteriorate, sometimes rapidly. We should not expect to see one task “completed,” followed by the beginning of the next; a better way to put it is that substantial progress on one task can pave the way for others, while the earlier efforts must be sustained. Each task can be a contentious proposition—indeed, must be so in the long run. And some societies are so fragile and deeply divided that *none* of the four tasks can be addressed until a workable level of trust has developed, and governing elites and institutions have earned some credibility (on those issues see Johnston 2011; 2014, chap. 3).

How can we know success when we see it? Existing corruption indices are likely to be of little help, either for identifying reform targets or for measuring change. A more promising approach might be to gather and publish indicators and benchmarks of government performance, particularly in policy and service sectors that matter most to citizens, and where even modest improvements in performance might help build trust (Johnston 2014, chap. 3). Even in societies struggling to escape fragile situations, higher levels of trust, improving expectations, and increasing citizen participation in public life, on a wide range of issues, not just reform, could do much more to persuade people that



reform is real than changing index scores can. None of that is simple or irreversible, and none of that guarantees success. At best, the four tasks addressed in sequence, coupled with clear evidence that putting pressure upon those who govern can lead to noticeable improvements in the quality of life, may replicate key elements of the deep democratization processes that have checked abuses of power in times past. None of that is guaranteed to counteract the increasing hegemony of wealth in many contemporary societies, but perhaps such changes will help democratic institutions and processes (including, but not limited to, elections) play a more effective role in serving at least some of the interests of citizens.

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